



The Public Health Investigator's Expanding Role

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Health department administrators encounter many situations, requests, and complaints that cannot be quickly categorized into standard or even new areas of responsibility of the department. To protect the public's health and still maintain a favorable image in the community, these problems must be resolved satisfactorily and expeditiously. Toward this end, the County of Los Angeles Health Department has expanded the role of the investigators in its Public Health Investigation (PHI) Division.

Background of PHI Division

Communicable disease. In the late 1930's an employee of the department was assigned to enforce legal orders for examination or isolation, or both, of persons known to have or suspected of having a communicable disease and to issue complaints for prosecution of violators of these orders. As other personnel were assigned to assist in this task, the division of communicable disease inspection (CDI) was created. This division was also given the assignment of enforcing rabies control laws and ordinances.

As public health programs evolved, so did additional assignments to the CDI division; most of these were related to the control of communicable diseases. By the mid-1960's it was clear that the division was fulfilling an indispensable need in the department by handling assignments that ranged from unique to emergent to routine problems that were paramedical, legal, or strictly investigative. At this time the division was structured as "centralized specialists" with all but district rabies control personnel assigned to and working from administrative headquarters or as specialists in their assigned sections.

The CDI division comprised four sections—rabies, tuberculosis, venereal disease, and general communicable disease. The rabies section was used for entry and training of new personnel (level-1 salary). All other positions in the division were filled by personnel in the senior level or by heads of sections.

When senior positions were vacated or new positions budgeted, investigators were promoted from civil service lists to a specialty; most remained indefinitely in that section. The assignments for the four sections were as follows.

Rabies Control

1. Investigate all reported animal bites, quarantine the biting animal, and refer victims to medical care.
2. Investigate all reports of clinically suspect or laboratory positive animals, refer human contacts for medical care, quarantine animal contacts, and advise owners.



The investigators always explain legal orders, for examination at a clinic or isolation at the hospital, to the patient.

3. Consult with and assist private veterinarians regarding public health and rabies control activities.
4. Consult with and advise city officials regarding animal control laws and ordinances.
5. Assist and advise community and private agencies in rabies control and reporting techniques.

General Communicable Disease Control

1. Assist the physician responsible for communicable disease control and district health officers in epidemiology and problems of patients with enteric disease and their contacts working in "sensitive" occupations.
2. Surveillance of improperly immunized foreign travelers.
3. Investigate and enforce activities to control psittacosis and plague.
4. Quarantine beach areas to prevent poisoning from mussels.
5. Observe preparation and shipment of corpses to countries which require certification by the local

A recalcitrant tuberculosis patient is transported to the hospital by a public health investigator.



health department for compliance with their regulations.

6. Perform special investigation as assigned by the health officer.

Venereal Disease Control

1. Provide information to private physicians on health department services and encourage reporting of cases of venereal disease.
2. Investigate patients with gonorrhea reported by private physicians and interview them for names of contacts.
3. Interview patients in the health center clinic and perform associated field investigations in locating contacts and bringing them to treatment.
4. Investigate and follow up reported cases of gonorrhea and syphilis in prisoners.

Tuberculosis Control

1. Investigate and locate referred recalcitrant patients or those lost to followup.
2. Serve legal orders for examination at clinics, isolation at home, or isolation at institutions.
3. File complaints and assist in the prosecution of persons who violate orders.
4. Refer patients located in other jurisdictions.

Alcohol program. In 1965 a public health investigator was assigned part time to a new alcohol program. He was to assist in developing a working relationship with the municipal courts whereby prisoners with drinking problems who were screened and considered amenable to medical care and supervision would be channeled into the health department program.

In 1966 an investigator was assigned to the alcohol program on a full-time basis. Since that time, investigators have been an integral part of each alcohol clinic team. Briefly, the current assignments of the public health investigators in the alcohol program are as follows.

1. Serve as liaison with the courts.
2. Serve as case manager for court-referred patients.
3. Gather facts and analyze them for evaluation of services.
4. Serve as an educator and monitor at "rap" sessions.
5. Perform followup activities on patients discharged from the clinic.

PHI Division is Named

All the investigative activities described were combined into a "decentralized generalist" structure in spring 1968, and personnel were trained to carry out all types of assignments. Most of the investigators were assigned to the 12 district headquarters, each of which is headed by a level-2 line supervisor.



Investigators post warnings in beach areas to prevent poisoning from mussels and clams.

Five level-3 consultant-specialists and a small core of specialists under their direct supervision were headquartered centrally to handle unique and emergent problems, problems of prisoners, and cases that cross district boundaries and may require excessive investigative time.

This was the ideal time to devise a title for all the investigative activities, and Public Health Investigation Division was selected. This title was considered more descriptive of current tasks, and it would encompass the trend of expanding assignments.

Drug Abuse

In March 1970 the county health department embarked on a drug abuse program. The clinics were initially directed to assist the youthful drug abuser. The investigator's assignments are similar to those in the alcohol program—liaison to the courts, probation department, law enforcement agencies, and hospitals. He provides transportation when needed and performs followup investigations to assist in evaluating program effectiveness.

In November 1970 the program was expanded to include methadone maintenance clinics to assist the "hard-core" heroin-dependent person. The investigator's skills are invaluable in collecting information on patients relating to drug dependence and criminal activity for intake screening into the program.

All roles of the investigator are not yet identified or clearly defined in the drug abuse program. The roles may very well expand and alter direction as the program evolves. It is also expected that the skills and services of the investigator will be extremely valuable in other programs now in the planning stages, such as chronic diseases and accident prevention.

Public Health Investigators

Candidates for the PHI division must have an academic degree, preferably in public health. As a substitute for the public health degree, a candidate may have a bachelor's degree with a minimum of 30 semester units of basic sciences or 1 year of full-time, or equivalent, experience in investigation or inspection work in public health or law enforcement.

The candidates are carefully screened through oral interviews to determine their inclination and aptitude for the various assignments and duties to be performed. Some who are qualified to take the examination are not necessarily qualified to do the work, or they may shun some of the specific assignments. Early identification of such candidates saves time and training costs.

A candidate enters the division as an assistant public health investigator at a salary of \$715 per month. After 1 year, if he successfully completes an examination, he is promoted to level-1, for which the salary ranges from \$842 to \$1,048 per month. The salary for level-2 district line supervisors ranges from \$914 to \$1,138, and for level-3 consultant-specialist from \$940 to \$1,170.

The primary responsibility of the division's assistant chief is consultant-supervisor to district personnel. He also assists with administrative duties. The chief of the division is responsible for administration, and he is the consultant-supervisor of the level-3 consultant-specialists and the specialist programs.

Currently, the staff consists of 98 investigators, three clerks in the administrative headquarters, and three part-time student professional workers who record messages to the health department during other than regular hours and refer emergency calls to appropriate personnel.

The practical strength and long-term value of the services of the PHI division are in the abilities of the personnel to obtain cooperation and support of patients with problems through education and persuasion. These methods are used regardless of a patient's antagonistic attitude or behavior, since the investigator is trained to resolve most problem situations.

When education and persuasion fail, the investigator resorts to his authority to issue a legal order advising the patient to comply with specific directives and instructions of the department. A violation of a written order is a misdemeanor, and a complaint is issued. The violator is brought into court to answer charges, and he may be sentenced or placed on probation, or both.

The investigator develops his skills through in-service, ongoing training programs, study and research, and carrying out assignments. Since there is no correlation of the total of these assignments to any other field of work, training is necessarily on the job. Nevertheless, under skillful supervision and with both verbal and written guidelines, the investigators develop skills rapidly in public health investigation, education, community relations, and enforcement.

Division personnel are called on to resolve unique and emergent problems by assignment by the health

officer and program directors, as well as by the nature of their work activities. Many of these problems have humorous aspects because of patients' reactions or because of the situation itself. For the same reasons, some problems are dangerous and others are tragic when crisis intervention is involved. Most involve emotional patients. However, the variety of assignments and situations challenges the investigator and is a stimulus to better performance.

Small health departments may not be able to use economically the special skills of the public health investigator as described. Large health departments may be accomplishing the assignments satisfactorily by fragmenting the tasks among several disciplines. Many public health officials who have explored our PHI division expressed the opinion that a large health department would find the quality of completed tasks enhanced and accomplished more expeditiously if they were assigned to skilled employees—well-trained public health investigators.

This finding has been proved by the performance of our investigators. We find that when public health programs involve administrators in other disciplines, they tend to rely on the Public Health Investigation Division to resolve the difficult, the unique, the emergent, and the troublesome problems.

Public health investigators appear in court for a variety of reasons, as described in text.

